The American Gorbachev: Trump, Strategic Retrenchment, and the Unmaking of Hegemonic Infrastructure

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Abstract

Donald Trump and Mikhail Gorbachev appear, at first glance, to be almost perfect opposites. Gorbachev was a reforming Soviet leader associated with political liberalization, accommodation with the West, and the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet sphere. Trump is a nationalist American president whose political identity is built around strength, sovereignty, military power, transactional bargaining, and the restoration implied by the phrase "Make America Great Again." Yet historical analogies need not depend on ideological resemblance. They may instead concern **structural function and unintended consequence**.

This paper develops the hypothesis that Trump's second presidency may prove "Gorbachev-like" in a specific sense: an attempt to restore a superpower by reducing what its leader regards as excessive burdens may instead accelerate the decomposition of the international architecture through which that superpower exercises its influence. The emerging contraction of the American military footprint in Syria and Iraq, increasing constraints on the use of U.S. facilities elsewhere in the Middle East, the vulnerability of fixed regional bases, the development of alternative security relationships among regional powers, and the broader transactionalization of alliances suggest a distinction between military capability and hegemonic control. A state can retain overwhelming destructive power while progressively losing the network of permissions, expectations, dependencies, institutions, and political alignments that previously converted that power into durable influence.

The comparison with Gorbachev is therefore not a claim that the United States resembles the Soviet Union, that American collapse is imminent, or that Trump and Gorbachev share motivations. Rather, it identifies a possible common mechanism: **a leader seeking national restoration discovers too late that apparently costly peripheral commitments were constitutive elements of the very system whose power he intended to preserve**. The paper proposes that hegemonic decline should consequently be studied not merely as territorial withdrawal or military defeat but as a nonlinear transformation in network topology. Bases may remain while permissions disappear; alliances may survive on paper while confidence decays;

allies may remain friendly while constructing systems that no longer require the center. In such a transition, empire or hegemony can begin to disappear before its map visibly changes.

Keywords: Trump, Gorbachev, American hegemony, Middle East, military bases, strategic retrenchment, multipolarity, alliances, network theory, unintended consequences.

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1. Introduction: The Joke That May Become a Historical Metaphor

Political memes are rarely good political science. Occasionally, however, a joke compresses an idea more efficiently than an essay.

An altered photograph of Donald Trump circulating online gives him something resembling Mikhail Gorbachev's distinctive forehead birthmark. The joke requires almost no explanation. Gorbachev became inseparable in the historical imagination from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. To place his identifying mark on Trump is therefore to make an accusation or prediction in a single visual gesture:

This may be the man who presides over the dissolution of his own superpower's order.

Taken literally, the analogy is poor.

Taken structurally, it deserves examination.

Donald Trump is not Mikhail Gorbachev. The United States of the 2020s is not the Soviet Union of the 1980s. NATO is not the Warsaw Pact. Saudi Arabia is not East Germany. American military installations in the Persian Gulf are not Soviet garrisons stationed throughout an involuntary ideological empire. The American economy does not reproduce the structural failures of the late Soviet command economy, and contemporary American political institutions bear little resemblance to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

If the analogy depended upon such equivalences, it could be discarded immediately.

But there is another way historical analogy operates.

Two systems can be profoundly different while undergoing a similar **relational transition**.

The important question is therefore not:

Is Trump similar to Gorbachev?

It is:

Could Trump occupy a Gorbachev-like position in the history of American power?

That is a much more interesting proposition.

Gorbachev did not enter office intending to abolish the Soviet Union. He sought to rescue it.

Trump did not return to office promising American decline. His political identity is explicitly restorative.

That shared orientation toward restoration produces the paradox at the center of this paper.

A leader looks at an inherited superpower system and sees enormous expenditures, inefficient commitments, free riders, obsolete arrangements, bureaucratic inertia, and strategic overextension. He concludes, quite reasonably from one perspective, that preserving national power requires cutting away these burdens.

But suppose some of those burdens are not merely costs.

Suppose they are **load-bearing structures**.

Then a reform intended to strengthen the center can weaken the system connecting the center to its periphery.

This is the Gorbachev problem.

And it may now also be an American problem.

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2. Gorbachev Without Gorbachevism

The analogy developed here has nothing to do with making Trump ideologically Gorbachevian.

Indeed, their political languages could hardly be more different.

Gorbachev spoke of restructuring and openness. Trump speaks of sovereignty, reciprocity, tariffs, borders, military strength, and national greatness. Gorbachev sought accommodation with geopolitical opponents partly to reduce the burden of confrontation. Trump frequently uses confrontation itself as a negotiating instrument.

Their temperaments, coalitions, rhetoric, political objectives, and historical environments differ profoundly.

Yet history sometimes produces similarities of **role** from differences of intention.

Consider the defining tragedy—or achievement, depending upon one's perspective—of Gorbachev's career.

He discovered that the Soviet system could not easily be partially liberalized.

Reforms intended to make the system function better altered relationships among its constituent parts. Once censorship weakened, suppressed grievances became articulable. Once political competition became possible, alternatives became organizable. Once Moscow demonstrated that it would not automatically use overwhelming force to preserve communist governments in Eastern Europe, those governments ceased to operate under the same constraint.

The crucial transformation was therefore not simply ideological.

It concerned expectations.

For decades, one assumption organized the Soviet sphere:

Moscow will ultimately enforce the system.

Once that proposition became doubtful, enormous portions of Soviet power disappeared without a decisive military defeat.

This observation provides the bridge to the contemporary American case.

For an alliance network, too, expectations are infrastructure.

A treaty is important.

A military base is important.

A carrier group is important.

But expectations concerning their future use may be even more important.

Does Washington arrive when needed?

Will Washington stay?

Can an ally rely upon a commitment across administrations?

Will access to American military power come with conditions that make independent alternatives necessary?

Can an American base in one's territory actually be used during the crisis for which it ostensibly exists?

These questions do not appear on conventional maps of military power.

Yet they determine the meaning of the map.

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3. The Difference Between Power and a Power System

One of the greatest conceptual errors in thinking about superpowers is the tendency to equate power with inventory.

How many aircraft?

How many missiles?

How many ships?

How many nuclear warheads?

How much military expenditure?

How large a gross domestic product?

These quantities matter enormously.

But a superpower is not simply a country possessing a very large arsenal.

It is a country embedded within a **power system**.

That system consists of relationships.

Military installations are relationships between armed forces and host governments.

Alliances are relationships among expectations.

Reserve currencies are relationships among governments, financial institutions, corporations, and individuals.

Intelligence networks are relationships among agencies.

Supply chains are relationships among producers.

Diplomatic influence is relational almost by definition.

Standards dominate because others adopt them.

Sanctions work because others participate in the financial architecture through which sanctions propagate.

A superpower therefore does not merely possess power.

It occupies a privileged position inside a network through which the actions of others reinforce its capabilities.

This distinction permits what would otherwise appear paradoxical:

A country can become militarily stronger while becoming geopolitically weaker.

It can possess better aircraft while fewer countries permit those aircraft to operate from their territory.

It can develop more advanced weapons while allies increasingly hedge against changes in its policy.

It can spend more on defense while alternative regional institutions grow around it.

It can win battles while losing the political architecture that made those battles strategically useful.

Military capability and hegemonic position are related.

They are not identical.

This may be the central fact required to understand the present American situation.

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4. The American Base Network as Hegemonic Infrastructure

The global network of American military installations is often discussed as though it were simply a collection of places where soldiers, aircraft, ships, weapons, and supplies are stored.

That description misses its deeper significance.

A foreign military base is simultaneously several things.

It is logistical infrastructure.

It is a political agreement.

It is an intelligence node.

It is a deterrent signal.

It is a commitment device.

It is a physical manifestation of an alliance.

It creates habitual cooperation between militaries.

It embeds American personnel within the security calculations of another government.

And perhaps most importantly, it reduces the distance—physical, bureaucratic, diplomatic, and psychological—between an American decision and an American action.

For this reason the strategic value of a base cannot be measured merely by counting runways or personnel.

A base has what might be called a **permission layer**.

The land can remain.

The runway can remain.

The aircraft can remain.

But political permission can narrow.

And once permission narrows sufficiently, the military meaning of the installation changes.

This leads to one of the central propositions of this paper:

A great power can lose a base without physically leaving it.

Indeed, there are at least three distinct kinds of base loss.

The first is obvious:

physical loss.

Troops depart. Facilities close. Territory is handed back.

The second is subtler:

political loss.

The facility remains, but the host government restricts what operations can be conducted from it.

The third may be the most dangerous:

loss of sanctuary.

The base remains available politically but has become sufficiently vulnerable to precision missiles, drones, sabotage, cyberattack, or infrastructure disruption that its military usefulness during major conflict diminishes sharply.

These three forms of loss should not be conflated.

But neither should analysis count only the first.

The Middle East during Trump's second term is particularly revealing because all three processes can be observed simultaneously.

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5. Three Ways to Lose a Base Without Losing the Base

Consider a hypothetical American installation called Base A.

Ten thousand personnel remain there.

Satellite imagery shows aircraft parked on the apron.

The American flag remains over the headquarters.

A conventional basing map colors the country as hosting a major U.S. installation.

Nothing appears to have changed.

Now imagine that the host government tells Washington:

You may use Base A for defensive interception, logistics, surveillance, and counterterrorism.

You may not use it to launch offensive strikes against Country X.

Has the United States lost the base?

No.

And yes.

It still possesses an installation.

It has lost an option.

Now suppose Country X possesses enough accurate missiles to crater the runway repeatedly, destroy exposed aircraft, damage fuel storage, disable power generation, and compel evacuation of nonessential personnel.

The base remains.

Another set of options has disappeared.

Finally, suppose the host government begins developing independent defense arrangements precisely because it is uncertain whether Washington will defend it consistently.

The base may remain for another twenty years.

But the political system around the base has begun to change.

This distinction matters enormously because hegemonic contraction may therefore precede visible territorial contraction.

The old map remains recognizable.

The relationships represented by the map no longer mean what they once meant.

That is how a geopolitical order can begin disappearing while appearing superficially intact.

And that is where the Gorbachev analogy becomes unexpectedly powerful.

Gorbachev did not initially erase the Soviet geopolitical map.

He changed the **conditions governing relationships within it**.

Once those conditions changed, the map changed afterward.

The possibility worth examining is whether something analogous is occurring within the American international system today.

Not because Washington has become Moscow.

Not because Trump has become Gorbachev.

But because **systems frequently disappear relationally before they disappear geographically**.

That will be the argument developed in the sections that follow.

6. Syria and Iraq: Physical Contraction

The most visible form of strategic retrenchment is the simplest one to describe: forces leave.

In Syria, the American military presence was always relatively small compared with the immense footprint created during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet its significance exceeded its size. The American position functioned simultaneously as a counter-ISIS platform, a source of leverage over Syrian territorial arrangements, a constraint on Iranian movement across the region, and a physical reminder that the United States remained embedded in the postwar balance.

When such positions are abandoned, the effect is not reducible to personnel numbers.

A base is a node.

Once the node disappears, every relationship that depended upon it must reroute.

Logistics change.

Intelligence changes.

Local partners adjust their expectations.

Regional adversaries recalculate.

Neighboring states revise contingency plans.

The result is not necessarily catastrophe. It may even represent a rational reduction of an obsolete commitment. But the relevant geopolitical fact remains: a network has fewer nodes than it had before.

Iraq is even more complicated because American presence there has always carried two contradictory meanings.

For Washington, it has been an instrument of regional access, counterterrorism, intelligence collection, deterrence, and influence over a state occupying one of the most strategically important locations in the Middle East.

For many Iraqis, however, that same presence has carried the memory of invasion, occupation, sovereignty loss, civil conflict, and repeated confrontation with Iranian-aligned militias.

The American position in Iraq is therefore structurally unstable in a way that bases in long-established treaty allies are not. It survives not merely through military capacity but through continuous political renegotiation.

This distinction matters.

A superpower may possess enough force to remain somewhere indefinitely.

That does not mean remaining there indefinitely is politically sustainable.

The strategic map of the Middle East is therefore shaped by a strange asymmetry: the United States can often destroy vastly more military capability than any regional opponent, yet it cannot manufacture host-country legitimacy by force.

That is a boundary condition on hegemony.

The distinction between **ability to occupy** and **ability to remain invited** is fundamental.

A hegemonic system works most efficiently when the second makes the first unnecessary.

The moment the system begins depending increasingly upon coercive retention, it has already become more expensive.

And the moment departure becomes politically easier than maintaining permission, the system begins to contract.

This does not mean Syria and Iraq are repetitions of Eastern Europe in 1989.

It does mean that physical withdrawal is one measurable component of a larger phenomenon: the reduction of the number of places from which American regional power can be exercised routinely, predictably, and politically cheaply.

That last word matters.

Cheaply.

Hegemony is not merely the ability to do something.

It is the ability to make others help make it easy.

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7. The Gulf: Permission Without Ownership

The Gulf presents a more sophisticated problem because here the United States can retain large military installations while simultaneously losing strategic freedom.

This is where a simple map of American bases becomes deceptive.

Suppose an analyst looks at Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and surrounding facilities and concludes that American regional power remains largely intact because the installations remain.

That judgment assumes that geography equals permission.

It does not.

A foreign base exists inside the sovereignty of another country.

Every American runway in the Gulf therefore contains an invisible political boundary.

Its usability depends upon what the host government will permit under specific circumstances.

This can create a remarkable contradiction.

A government may want American protection against missiles but oppose American offensive operations launched from its territory.

It may welcome American intelligence capabilities while simultaneously seeking political accommodation with Iran.

It may depend upon American air defense while refusing to be drawn into a war initiated by Washington.

It may cooperate militarily with the United States and diplomatically with China.

It may purchase American weapons while simultaneously building security partnerships with Turkey, Pakistan, India, Russia, or other regional actors.

From a binary perspective, this looks inconsistent.

From the standpoint of a smaller or middle power, it is entirely rational.

The objective is not necessarily to choose one patron.

The objective is to avoid dependence upon any single patron.

This is the logic of strategic hedging.

And hedging is one of the most important early indicators of weakening hegemony.

An ally does not need to defect.

It only needs to insure against the possibility that the center may fail.

The process can happen quietly.

No dramatic treaty is renounced.

No embassy closes.

No anti-American revolution occurs.

Instead, relationships multiply.

The host government signs new defense agreements.

It conducts exercises with new partners.

It buys weapons from several suppliers.

It negotiates independently with regional adversaries.

It declines requests that it would once have accepted automatically.

It becomes less predictable.

Each individual decision may appear modest.

Taken together, they represent a change in the geometry of power.

The old architecture is hub-and-spoke:

Washington at the center.

Allies connected principally through Washington.

The emerging architecture is increasingly meshed:

Washington remains one powerful node, but the peripheral nodes connect directly to one another.

This distinction can be represented conceptually.

In a highly centralized alliance system:

Peripheral security depends on the center.

In a multipolar security system:

Peripheral actors increasingly generate security through lateral relationships.

The difference is profound.

A hub is powerful because many paths pass through it.

When new paths bypass the hub, the hub may retain enormous intrinsic capacity while losing network centrality.

This is the geopolitical equivalent of being routed around.

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8. From Sanctuary to Target

For much of the post-Cold War era, American military bases in the Middle East functioned as something close to rear areas.

They were not literally invulnerable. Terrorism, rocket attacks, sabotage, and ballistic missiles were always recognized threats.

But the deeper operational assumption was that American regional infrastructure enjoyed overwhelming protective superiority.

Airfields could launch aircraft.

Ports could receive ships.

Fuel farms could supply operations.

Command headquarters could coordinate campaigns.

The infrastructure itself was treated as the stable platform from which instability elsewhere would be managed.

That assumption has weakened.

Precision missiles, inexpensive drones, loitering munitions, distributed launch systems, cyber operations, and massed salvos have altered the economics of attacking fixed facilities.

A multibillion-dollar military installation can be threatened by weapons whose unit costs are orders of magnitude smaller than the infrastructure they force the defender to protect.

This produces an unfavorable defensive asymmetry.

The attacker does not necessarily need to destroy the base.

It may be enough to force dispersion.

It may be enough to interrupt flight operations.

It may be enough to keep expensive interceptors constantly engaged.

It may be enough to compel aircraft relocation.

It may be enough to persuade civilian dependents and nonessential personnel to leave.

It may be enough to make the host government conclude that hosting the base increases national risk.

In other words, the relevant metric is not destruction.

It is **operational friction**.

This changes the meaning of forward deployment.

Historically, forward bases reduced reaction time and extended American reach.

But if those same bases become highly visible fixed targets, forward deployment also concentrates vulnerability.

The strategic advantage begins to contain its own inverse.

The base that shortens American distance to the battlefield also shortens the adversary's distance to American infrastructure.

This has implications well beyond the Middle East.

A global military system built during an era of overwhelming American sanctuary may require substantial redesign in an era of cheap precision attack.

The response is already conceptually obvious:

disperse forces,

harden infrastructure,

duplicate logistics,

preposition equipment,

use mobile platforms,

increase missile defense,

decentralize command,

build redundancy.

But every one of these solutions costs money.

More importantly, every one reduces the efficiency advantage that made concentrated forward basing so attractive.

The great strategic irony is therefore this:

The more vulnerable fixed American bases become, the more expensive it becomes to preserve the advantages those bases were originally built to provide.

A hegemonic system can thus face increasing costs without visibly losing territory.

That is another form of contraction.

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9. Transactional Alliances and the Destruction of Network Value

The political philosophy of transactional alliance management appears intuitive.

If the United States provides military protection, allied states should contribute proportionally.

If another country benefits from American security guarantees, it should pay more.

If a trade arrangement produces persistent disadvantages, renegotiate it.

If a military commitment no longer advances American interests, reduce it.

At the bilateral level, each argument can be defended.

The difficulty appears at the network level.

Networks produce value that cannot always be assigned cleanly to individual transactions.

Consider an airport hub.

A single route may appear unprofitable when evaluated independently.

Yet removing that route can reduce the value of several other routes because passengers no longer connect through the hub.

Continue eliminating individually weak routes and the system can pass a threshold.

What seemed like a collection of bilateral routes was actually an integrated network.

Alliances can behave similarly.

Suppose Washington asks what it receives from defending Country A.

That question is legitimate.

But the answer may not reside primarily inside Country A.

Country A may provide basing access supporting Country B.

Its intelligence service may contribute information relevant to Country C.

Its participation in sanctions may increase pressure on Country D.

Its diplomatic alignment may influence Country E.

Its ports may sustain naval operations throughout an entire region.

Its willingness to accept American leadership may encourage neighboring countries to do the same.

The value of the relationship is therefore distributed across the network.

Transactional analysis tends to collapse this distributed value into a bilateral ledger.

Protection provided.

Money received.

Trade deficit.

Troops hosted.

Percentage of GDP spent on defense.

This is measurable.

Network centrality is harder to measure.

And what is difficult to measure is easily undervalued.

This creates a potential strategic trap.

A leader may correctly identify that allies have underpaid for decades and still incorrectly conclude that the alliance system itself is therefore a bad bargain.

The two propositions are not equivalent.

Indeed, one reason allies can appear to receive unusually favorable terms is that the central power receives something less visible in return:

systemic primacy.

The United States did not merely defend countries.

It positioned itself as the country around which their defense planning was organized.

That distinction is enormous.

The first generates costs.

The second generates power.

A transactional approach risks maximizing bilateral returns while reducing systemic centrality.

It may produce better deals and a weaker network.

That possibility is central to the Trump-Gorbachev analogy.

A reformer may identify real inefficiencies.

The reformer may even be correct about nearly every individual inefficiency.

Yet by attacking them independently, he may alter the architecture that made the total system powerful.

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10. When Allies Begin Connecting Around the Center

The most important moment in the weakening of a hub-and-spoke system may not be when a spoke breaks away.

It may be when the spokes begin connecting to one another.

This is the point at which the topology changes.

Imagine five states whose defense relationships all run principally through Washington.

Each state depends on American intelligence, American equipment, American diplomacy, American deterrence, or American military presence.

Even if these states disagree among themselves, the center remains indispensable because it mediates their security environment.

Now suppose those same states begin constructing direct relationships.

One state enters a defense pact with another.

Two former rivals normalize relations.

A regional power sells weapons to a neighbor.

Countries previously dependent on American mediation create their own crisis mechanisms.

States conduct joint exercises without American leadership.

Regional diplomatic disputes are settled through local institutions.

American involvement may continue.

But the paths multiply.

The center becomes less indispensable.

This does not necessarily mean the new lateral relationships are anti-American.

That is precisely why they can be underestimated.

The transformation may occur while every participant continues describing the United States as a valued strategic partner.

There need be no dramatic break.

The shift is from:

“We rely on Washington.”

to:

“Washington is one component of our security portfolio.”

The grammatical difference is slight.

The geopolitical difference is profound.

This is where contemporary Middle Eastern developments become especially important.

The region is not simply polarizing into American and anti-American camps.

Something more complex is occurring.

States that once had powerful incentives to locate themselves firmly within one geopolitical bloc increasingly seek multiple simultaneous relationships.

Saudi Arabia can maintain a security relationship with Washington while engaging Beijing.

Turkey can remain inside NATO while pursuing independent regional objectives.

Gulf states can cooperate with the United States while negotiating directly with Iran.

Regional governments can buy American aircraft, Chinese drones, European systems, and Turkish defense technology.

This behavior is often interpreted as opportunistic diplomacy.

At sufficient scale, however, it represents the emergence of a different international structure.

The system becomes less imperial, less bipolar, and less unipolar.

It becomes **polycentric**.

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11. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, and Strategic Hedging

The emergence of tighter security relationships among Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan is therefore important not primarily because it constitutes an explicitly anti-American alliance.

Its significance is almost the opposite.

Such arrangements demonstrate that countries historically connected to the American security architecture increasingly see value in creating additional architectures of their own.

Saudi Arabia brings extraordinary financial resources, energy centrality, and political significance in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Turkey possesses one of the region's most capable militaries, an expanding defense-industrial base, geographic control over a uniquely important crossroads, and institutional experience through NATO.

Pakistan brings a large military establishment, longstanding connections across the Islamic world, and nuclear status.

The precise durability and operational meaning of any trilateral defense arrangement should not be exaggerated.

Agreements can be symbolic.

Interests can diverge.

States can sign ambitious documents that produce little practical integration.

But the structural significance does not require the emergence of a Middle Eastern NATO.

The important fact is that major regional states perceive benefits in building defense relationships not wholly mediated by Washington.

This is strategic insurance.

Insurance does not imply certainty that disaster will occur.

It implies uncertainty about whether existing protection will suffice.

That distinction leads to an important indicator of hegemonic health:

The strongest measure of an alliance may not be how many allies formally remain, but how much insurance those allies believe they need against the alliance itself.

If allied governments increasingly build backup systems, alternative suppliers, new diplomatic alignments, and independent military capabilities, their behavior conveys information.

They may still trust Washington.

They trust it less exclusively.

That may be the political equivalent of capital diversification.

No prudent investor puts everything into one asset.

No prudent state places its survival indefinitely in the hands of one external power if alternatives exist.

The unipolar moment temporarily made such concentration appear rational because American predominance was so extreme.

Multipolarity makes diversification rational again.

Trump's transactional approach may accelerate that diversification not because allies necessarily reject the United States, but because it makes explicit something previously obscured:

American commitments are political decisions.

Political decisions can change.

They can change after elections.

They can change according to cost.

They can change according to whether allies are judged deserving.

They can change according to the preferences of one president.

Once this uncertainty becomes salient, hedging is not disloyalty.

It is statecraft.

And once everyone hedges simultaneously, the network changes whether anyone intended to change it or not.

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12. The Topology of Hegemonic Decline

The language of “decline” is often misleading because it encourages the image of a descending line.

Power at time one is high.

Power at time two is lower.

Power at time three is lower still.

History rarely behaves so smoothly.

Networked systems can remain remarkably stable while underlying conditions deteriorate.

Then they change quickly.

This is why topology may provide a better metaphor than simple decline.

A hegemonic order consists of nodes and relations.

The nodes include states, military bases, ports, intelligence agencies, financial institutions, defense contractors, reserve systems, diplomatic organizations, communications infrastructure, and multinational firms.

The edges include treaties, expectations, supply relationships, basing agreements, payment systems, information sharing, technology standards, personal relationships, and habitual patterns of consultation.

The strength of the system therefore depends not only upon the strength of the central node.

It depends upon the number and quality of edges connecting the system through that node.

A center can remain extremely powerful while its network loses density.

This produces a counterintuitive condition:

absolute power may remain enormous while relative centrality declines.

That may be one of the defining features of contemporary American power.

The United States may remain the world's most capable military actor while becoming less necessary to an increasing number of interactions among other states.

That distinction matters because hegemony is partly a property of necessity.

The hegemon is the actor others cannot conveniently bypass.

Once bypasses proliferate, the hegemon becomes merely the strongest actor inside a larger system.

That is still extraordinary power.

It is no longer the same kind of power.

The transformation can be formalized conceptually.

Let **C** represent the central power.

Let **P_1, P_2, P_3 ... P_n** represent peripheral allies and partners.

In the strongest hub-and-spoke configuration:

$P_1 \rightarrow C \leftarrow P_2$
$P_3 \rightarrow C \leftarrow P_4$
$P_5 \rightarrow C \leftarrow P_6$

The majority of consequential relationships pass through C.

Now add lateral links:

$P_1 \leftrightarrow P_2$
$P_2 \leftrightarrow P_4$
$P_3 \leftrightarrow P_5$
$P_4 \leftrightarrow P_6$

C has not disappeared.

Its military capability may not have declined at all.

Yet the shortest path connecting other actors increasingly avoids C.

In network terms, the central node can lose **betweenness centrality** without losing raw capacity.

This provides a remarkably useful way of thinking about hegemonic transition.

The question is not simply:

How powerful is America?

The question is:

How many important things can the rest of the system increasingly do without America?

That may prove to be the more historically consequential variable.

13. Gorbachev's Problem: The Periphery Learns That the Center Will Not Intervene

The decisive change in the Soviet sphere was not initially a change of borders. It was a change in expectation.

For decades, Eastern European governments operated beneath an implicit rule: there were limits beyond which political deviation would provoke intervention from Moscow. Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 had demonstrated the rule brutally. The Soviet Union did not need to invade every country repeatedly because the memory of intervention shaped behavior in advance.

This is one of the deepest properties of power. The strongest power is often power that does not have to be exercised. If everyone understands the boundary, behavior changes before coercion becomes necessary.

Gorbachev altered that expectation.

Once it became credible that Moscow would no longer automatically send tanks to preserve Communist rule, the political environment of Eastern Europe changed with astonishing speed. Opposition movements could calculate differently. Governments could negotiate differently. Citizens could protest differently. Political elites could imagine futures that previously seemed impossible.

The tanks themselves did not have to disappear first.

The **expectation of the tanks** disappeared first.

This distinction is central to understanding why geopolitical orders can unravel so quickly after appearing stable for decades. A system supported partly by anticipated intervention can remain intact until the expectation of intervention crosses a threshold. Once that expectation changes, the same physical military inventory produces a different political result.

The lesson extends beyond coercive empires.

Every security system depends upon expectations concerning future behavior.

An American ally does not merely ask how many aircraft the United States possesses. It asks whether those aircraft will arrive.

A government hosting an American base does not merely count American personnel. It asks what Washington will do if the country is attacked.

A state negotiating with an adversary does not merely calculate American military superiority. It calculates whether Washington is politically committed to using that superiority under the circumstances at hand.

These are credibility questions.

Credibility cannot be stored like ammunition.

It exists in the beliefs of others.

That makes it unusually fragile.

A missile destroyed can be replaced by manufacturing another missile. A damaged runway can be repaired. A depleted weapons stockpile can eventually be replenished.

A damaged expectation is more difficult to restore.

Once a government has concluded that it must prepare for American nonparticipation, the preparations themselves generate new political realities. Alternative alliances are negotiated. Indigenous military capacity is expanded. New suppliers are cultivated. Diplomatic relations with adversaries are normalized. Intelligence relationships diversify.

These actions may continue even if Washington later attempts to restore confidence.

The hedging infrastructure has already been built.

Gorbachev therefore illustrates a general rule about great-power systems:

Peripheral autonomy can increase dramatically before the center experiences any corresponding decline in raw military capability.

The Soviet army remained formidable in 1989.

What changed was the political meaning of its existence.

This is precisely why the Trump comparison should not be reduced to arguments about whether the United States is “declining” in conventional military terms. It may not be necessary for the United States to lose aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons, advanced aircraft, satellites, or economic scale.

The more important question is whether other states increasingly behave as though they cannot assume those capabilities will be deployed on their behalf.

That is where the analogy begins.

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14. Trump's Problem: The Periphery Learns That the Center Is Conditional

The American case differs fundamentally because Washington does not generally maintain its alliance system through the threat of invasion against its own allies. The relevant expectation is therefore not fear of American intervention but confidence in American commitment.

For much of the postwar period, American alliances developed an extraordinary psychological characteristic: permanence.

Administrations changed.

Presidents disagreed.

Wars came and went.

But the larger structure appeared durable.

NATO survived Republicans and Democrats. American forces remained in Japan and South Korea across radically different administrations. Gulf security relationships persisted through oil crises, wars, revolutions, terrorism, diplomatic ruptures, and domestic American political upheavals.

This durability created something economically valuable: **predictability**.

States could organize decades of defense planning around assumptions about American behavior.

Trump introduces a different governing principle.

Commitments become more explicitly conditional.

What does the ally contribute?

How much does it spend?

What does the United States receive?

Is the arrangement fair?

Would Washington actually defend a country that does not satisfy American expectations?

These questions are not inherently irrational. Indeed, alliance burden-sharing has been debated by American administrations for decades. What distinguishes the Trump approach is the degree to which conditionality itself becomes visible and politically central.

That visibility changes allied calculations.

A security guarantee that is formally unchanged but publicly described as contingent is not psychologically identical to an unconditional one.

And state behavior responds to perceived probabilities, not merely treaty language.

An allied government therefore faces a rational problem.

Suppose it estimates that the probability of American assistance in a future crisis was previously 95 percent. It now estimates the probability at 75 percent.

The alliance still looks strong.

Seventy-five percent is substantial.

But national survival cannot sensibly be wagered on a 25 percent possibility of abandonment.

So the state buys insurance.

It develops domestic military capability.

It seeks another defense partner.

It repairs relations with adversaries.

It acquires alternative weapons.

It creates redundant diplomatic channels.

None of these actions necessarily represents hostility toward Washington.

They represent adaptation to uncertainty.

The process becomes self-reinforcing.

The more allies hedge, the less indispensable Washington becomes.

The less indispensable Washington becomes, the easier it becomes for American policymakers to argue that the old commitments are unnecessary.

The more commitments become uncertain, the more allies hedge.

A feedback loop emerges:

conditionality → hedging → reduced dependence → weaker centrality → greater willingness to reduce commitments → more conditionality.

This is not a prediction of inevitable collapse.

It is a mechanism.

And mechanisms matter because large historical changes are frequently produced not by a single decision but by feedback among individually reasonable decisions.

Trump may see allied diversification as proof that the United States should stop subsidizing them.

The allies may see American conditionality as proof that diversification was necessary.

Both interpretations can be internally coherent.

Together they weaken the network.

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15. Restoration as a Mechanism of Dissolution

This is the paradox at the center of the Trump-Gorbachev comparison.

Both projects begin with restoration.

Gorbachev inherited a Soviet system experiencing stagnation. His response was reform. He did not believe that destroying the Soviet Union was the necessary price of modernization. The objective was to make socialism viable.

Trump's political project is even more explicitly restorative. The slogan contains the thesis: America was great, something went wrong, and greatness can be recovered.

The restorative leader therefore distinguishes between the nation and the structures believed to have weakened it.

Some institutions appear bureaucratic.

Some alliances appear exploitative.

Some international obligations appear unnecessarily expensive.

Some trade arrangements appear asymmetrical.

Some overseas deployments appear disconnected from immediate national interests.

The reformer asks:

Why maintain these?

The structural danger appears if what looks like accumulated inefficiency is actually part of the mechanism generating power.

Imagine a suspension bridge.

A maintenance review identifies hundreds of cables under tension.

Each cable imposes weight.

Each requires inspection.

Each costs money.

Removing selected cables appears to reduce complexity.

Yet the cables are not independent burdens sitting on the bridge.

Their tensions collectively constitute the bridge.

The geopolitical equivalent is easy to overlook because the connections are intangible.

A diplomatic consultation imposes cost.

A military deployment imposes cost.

An intelligence-sharing agreement imposes cost.

A security guarantee creates risk.

Foreign aid spends money outside the country.

A trade concession appears to sacrifice immediate advantage.

Examined separately, each item can look like leakage.

Together, however, they may create an environment in which other states voluntarily organize their behavior around the central power.

That is hegemony.

The empire that must conquer every territory is inefficient.

The hegemon that induces others to reproduce its preferred order voluntarily possesses a much cheaper form of power.

This is why the language of “free riders” can be both correct and incomplete.

Some allies undoubtedly benefit disproportionately from American protection.

But the United States also receives the privilege of inhabiting the center of their strategic calculations.

The bargain is not simply protection exchanged for money.

It is protection exchanged partly for **alignment**.

Alignment is difficult to price because it often appears as absence.

A hostile government did not come to power.

An adversary did not obtain the port.

A military procurement went to an American supplier.

A sanctions regime remained intact.

A diplomatic vote aligned with Washington.

An intelligence channel remained open.

A regional crisis was managed through American mediation.

A rival security architecture failed to emerge.

Nothing dramatic happened.

That absence can look worthless.

But the absence may itself be the return on investment.

A transactional reformer is therefore vulnerable to a systematic accounting error: visible costs are recorded, while counterfactual benefits are not.

The spreadsheet shows the soldiers.

It does not show the rival alliance that never formed.

It shows foreign aid.

It does not show the government that consequently remained cooperative.

It shows the cost of maintaining the base.

It does not show the strategic competitor that never acquired it.

This is precisely how restoration can become dissolution.

The reformer removes what appears unnecessary.

Only afterward does the system reveal what the supposedly unnecessary component had been supporting.

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16. Why the Soviet Analogy Can Mislead

A serious argument must identify where its analogy fails.

The differences between the Soviet Union and the contemporary United States are so substantial that careless comparison can produce more confusion than insight.

First, the Soviet Union was itself a multinational territorial state. Its dissolution involved the independence of constituent republics that had been incorporated into a single sovereign structure. The United States is not facing an equivalent geopolitical process merely because its external influence may contract.

Second, the Warsaw Pact and Soviet sphere were sustained to a significant degree through coercion. Military intervention had previously demonstrated the limits of political autonomy within Eastern Europe. American alliances, whatever their asymmetries, are generally relationships among sovereign governments that retain formal rights to change their policies and alliances.

Third, the Soviet economic system in its final decades suffered from profound structural dysfunction. Contemporary American economic weaknesses—debt, inequality, industrial dependence, fiscal pressures, infrastructure problems, and political polarization—are real, but they do not simply reproduce Soviet central planning or late-Soviet stagnation.

Fourth, the Soviet Union confronted a powerful, organized rival bloc led by the United States. The emerging world is considerably less tidy. China is the most obvious strategic competitor to the United States, but contemporary multipolarity involves India, the European Union, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Brazil, Iran, and numerous middle powers pursuing partially independent strategies.

There may therefore be no single successor to American primacy.

The system could fragment rather than transfer from one hegemon to another.

Fifth, America's geographic position is unusually favorable. Two vast oceans, comparatively weak immediate neighbors, large agricultural capacity, enormous natural resources, a continental economy, and nuclear deterrence make the territorial United States extraordinarily difficult to threaten in the way that historical continental empires have been threatened.

Sixth, American cultural, technological, scientific, educational, and financial influence exists partly outside government. Hollywood, universities, software companies, cloud infrastructure, biotechnology, financial markets, research institutions, consumer culture, English-language dominance, and private technology firms generate forms of influence that cannot be equated with military bases.

These differences make predictions of an “American Soviet collapse” analytically weak.

That is not the argument of this paper.

The narrower analogy concerns **system maintenance**.

A superpower can misunderstand which components of its inherited order are expendable.

It can reduce coercion or commitment.

Peripheral actors can respond by increasing autonomy.

The process can exceed the intentions of the reforming center.

Once alternative relationships develop, reversing the process becomes difficult.

That mechanism can recur in very different political systems.

Analogy is most useful when it identifies such mechanisms while refusing false equivalence.

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17. Why the Soviet Analogy May Nevertheless Matter

The analogy becomes valuable precisely after its superficial similarities are discarded.

The most important commonality is not economic.

It is not ideological.

It is not psychological.

It is **relational**.

Both cases involve a superpower system in which much of the center's power exists outside the center itself.

Moscow's geopolitical strength depended partly upon the behavior of governments across Eastern Europe.

Washington's geopolitical strength depends partly upon the behavior of allies and partners throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

In both cases, the center's power therefore cannot be measured solely by resources located inside national borders.

A portion of superpower capacity is externalized into the choices of other states.

This has an extraordinary consequence.

The center can lose power without losing its own assets.

Suppose an allied state previously gave Washington automatic access to a port.

It later requires case-by-case approval.

The American Navy has not lost a ship.

Yet American power has diminished.

Suppose a government previously purchased almost all of its major weapons from American companies.

It begins buying from three different countries.

The United States has not lost a factory.

Yet its leverage declines.

Suppose a country once relied overwhelmingly on American security guarantees.

It develops a parallel regional alliance.

No American brigade disappears.

Yet Washington's centrality falls.

This is **relational power loss**.

It is particularly difficult for domestic politics to perceive because domestic political debate naturally focuses on national assets.

How large is the defense budget?

How strong is the economy?

How many ships are being built?

How advanced is the technology?

All are important.

But hegemonic power exists partly in variables controlled by foreigners.

How much do they trust?

How much do they comply?

How much do they depend?

How often do they consult Washington first?

How costly would it be for them to bypass the United States?

These questions describe the invisible architecture of primacy.

Gorbachev's experience matters because it demonstrates how quickly relational power can disappear once peripheral expectations shift.

The material center can remain formidable while the network surrounding it reorganizes.

This is the serious meaning of the Gorbachev analogy.

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18. Military Supremacy Without Political Hegemony

The distinction between military supremacy and political hegemony may become one of the defining themes of the coming international order.

The United States could remain militarily unmatched in several categories for many years while losing some of its ability to determine the political consequences of military action.

This sounds paradoxical only if war is imagined as a purely destructive enterprise.

Military power answers the question:

What can you destroy, defend, seize, deny, or deter?

Political power asks another question:

What arrangement exists afterward?

The two are connected but not identical.

The United States demonstrated repeatedly after the Cold War that destroying an opposing military can be easier than constructing a stable political order.

The asymmetry becomes even more pronounced when the objective is not conquest but influence.

Aircraft can destroy infrastructure.

They cannot compel durable legitimacy.

Missiles can punish an adversary.

They cannot force an ally to trust future administrations.

Carrier groups can enter a region.

They cannot make a sovereign host government grant unlimited basing permission.

Military superiority therefore encounters a ceiling.

Beyond that ceiling, influence depends upon relationships.

This may produce the peculiar strategic environment of a post-hegemonic United States:

the world's most powerful military operating inside a world increasingly unwilling to organize itself around American preferences.

Such a United States would hardly be weak.

It could remain richer and more militarily capable than nearly every historical great power.

But its power would take a different form.

It would become more episodic.

More coercive.

More expensive.

More visibly military.

Less embedded.

Less automatic.

Less infrastructural.

The distinction matters because embedded power is cheap power.

If another state already wants what Washington wants, little coercion is required.

If its officers train on American doctrine, its weapons use American logistics, its banks transact through American financial systems, its intelligence services communicate constantly with American agencies, and its political leaders instinctively consult Washington during crises, the United States exercises influence before issuing a demand.

The network carries power continuously.

When that network weakens, influence must increasingly be produced transaction by transaction.

Every negotiation begins closer to zero.

Every coalition has to be rebuilt.

Every access agreement becomes conditional.

Every sanction requires renewed participation.

Every crisis tests the alliance again.

The hegemon becomes a great power.

Perhaps the greatest power.

But increasingly, only one power among several.

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19. From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

The end of an international order rarely arrives on a specific afternoon.

Historians impose dates afterward because narratives require punctuation.

The Soviet Union formally ceased to exist in December 1991, but the process that made that date possible unfolded over years.

The American unipolar era may prove similarly difficult to date.

Was its high point the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The Gulf War?

The expansion of NATO?

The invasion of Iraq?

The global financial crisis?

The rise of China?

The withdrawal from Afghanistan?

The second Trump presidency?

There may be no single answer because different dimensions of primacy peak at different times.

Military primacy may outlast diplomatic primacy.

Financial centrality may outlast military basing.

Technological dominance may decline while cultural influence persists.

Alliance networks may weaken while the dollar remains dominant.

History need not move synchronously.

For this reason, “multipolarity” should not be understood as a moment when several states suddenly become equal.

They need not be equal.

A multipolar world simply requires that no single center can reliably determine the major outcomes of the system.

That threshold may occur while the United States remains the most powerful individual state.

Indeed, this is perhaps the most plausible form of transition.

Not:

America disappears.

But:

America remains enormous while the world becomes less American.

That distinction captures much of what is visible in the Middle East.

Regional states do not necessarily seek to expel Washington.

Many still desire American weapons, intelligence, investment, technology, and protection.

What they increasingly resist is exclusive dependence.

They want Washington and Beijing.

Washington and regional alliances.

American missile defense and diplomatic relations with Tehran.

Western investment and Chinese infrastructure.

NATO membership and strategic autonomy.

This is not necessarily evidence of anti-Americanism.

It is evidence that the cost of maintaining multiple relationships has fallen below the cost of dependence upon one.

Multipolarity therefore grows not only because challengers become stronger.

It grows because middle powers become more capable of saying:

both.

The hegemonic world demands alignment.

The multipolar world rewards optionality.

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20. The Historical Question: When Did the American Order End?

If the American-led order is undergoing a genuine structural transition, future historians will face an interesting problem.

They will know the outcome.

We do not.

That difference changes everything.

People living through a geopolitical transition rarely experience it as a clean historical break. They experience headlines.

A base closes.

A treaty is questioned.

A government refuses access.

A regional defense agreement is signed.

An ally buys weapons from a competitor.

A sanctions coalition fractures.

A country settles a dispute without Washington.

A president declares that another ally must pay more.

A fleet is repositioned.

Each event appears local.

Only retrospectively does a pattern become visible.

This creates what might be called the **problem of historical phase recognition**.

When does accumulated quantitative change become qualitative change?

There is no geopolitical instrument panel displaying:

HEGEMONY: 63%

The system can therefore cross a threshold before its participants recognize that the threshold existed.

Consider the possible judgment of a historian writing in 2050.

Such a historian might describe the decades following the Cold War as the mature American unipolar order.

China's rise could appear as the external challenge.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars could appear as strategic overextension.

The 2008 financial crisis could appear as a blow to ideological prestige.

The first Trump presidency might appear as the first explicit rejection, from inside the center itself, of several assumptions sustaining the postwar order.

The Biden interlude could then appear as an attempted restoration.

Trump's second term might be interpreted as the point at which the transactional critique became embedded deeply enough to alter allied behavior irreversibly.

That interpretation is speculative.

Another historian might conclude that American alliances adapted successfully, that regional hedging strengthened rather than destroyed burden-sharing, and that the United States emerged from the period with a leaner but more sustainable network.

That possibility must remain open.

Historical analogy is not prophecy.

But the uncertainty itself does not eliminate the question.

It sharpens it:

Are we observing temporary turbulence within the American order, or the early stages of a successor order?

The difference may not be visible from any single event.

It will appear in the connectivity.

Who calls whom first?

Who protects whom?

Who supplies whom?

Who sets the terms?

Who can say no?

Who can act without permission?

And, above all:

Who can increasingly do without the center?

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21. The Face Attached to the Transition

The altered photograph with which this inquiry began is crude political humor.

A purple mark is placed on Donald Trump's forehead.

The visual reference is immediate.

Gorbachev.

The man associated with the end of a superpower system.

Political memes normally compress arguments by eliminating nuance. This one may accidentally reveal something that requires considerable nuance to understand.

Trump need not resemble Gorbachev personally.

America need not resemble the Soviet Union institutionally.

The United States need not collapse.

Trump need not seek retrenchment everywhere.

No single Middle Eastern base need determine anything.

The analogy survives all of those qualifications.

Its serious form is much narrower:

A leader promising restoration may accelerate systemic contraction by removing or conditionalizing relationships he interprets as burdens, without recognizing that those relationships constitute part of the mechanism of national power.

That is the proposition.

It is not an indictment of every attempt to reduce commitments.

Some commitments really are obsolete.

Some allies really do undercontribute.

Some overseas deployments really do create strategic liabilities.

Some bases really are indefensible.

Some wars should end.

Some institutions should be redesigned.

The existence of network value does not imply that every edge in the network must be preserved forever.

The challenge is distinguishing redundancy from structure.

That is extraordinarily difficult from inside a complex system.

The statesman sees expense.

History may see connective tissue.

The accountant sees subsidy.

History may see centrality.

The military planner sees a base.

The political scientist sees permission.

The ally sees insurance.

The adversary sees a target.

The network theorist sees a node.

All are describing the same object from different levels.

This is why the emerging American position in the Middle East deserves attention disproportionate to the number of troops involved.

The region may be showing, in compressed form, what a transition away from hegemonic centrality looks like.

Bases disappear in some places.

Elsewhere they remain but become politically constrained.

Elsewhere they remain politically available but militarily vulnerable.

Regional powers construct lateral relationships.

Former dependents hedge.

Security becomes diversified.

The United States remains extraordinarily powerful.

Yet the network becomes less centered on it.

If that process continues, there may never be a dramatic American equivalent of December 1991.

There need be no flag lowered over Washington.

No dissolution proclamation.

No successor states.

No single day separating one era from another.

An international hegemonic system can end much more quietly than a state.

One morning the bases are still there.

The treaties still exist.

The carriers still sail.

The dollar still circulates.

The president still commands extraordinary military power.

But the other actors have learned how to organize increasing portions of their world without the center.

At that point, nothing has collapsed.

And almost everything has changed.

That is the possibility contained in the Gorbachev meme.

The joke is that Trump has acquired Gorbachev's birthmark.

The historical question is whether he is acquiring something far more consequential:

Gorbachev's role as the reformer-restorer whose name becomes attached, against his intention, to the ending of an order.

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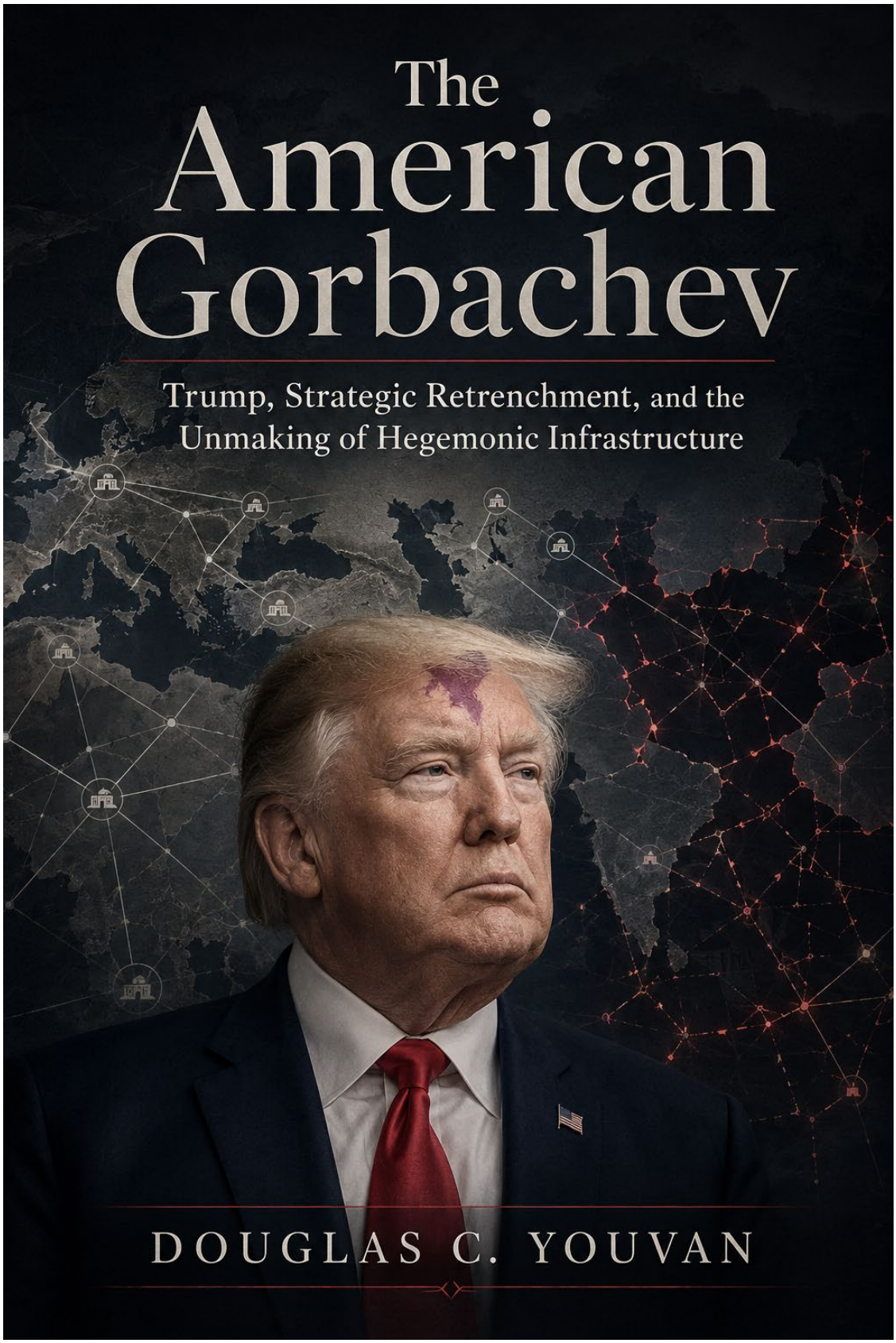
The
American
Gorbachev
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Unmaking of Hegemonic Infrastructure
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